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ABSTRACT

Composition instructors interested in fostering the development of their students' critical thinking skills can modify the thematic writing approach to that effect. Focusing an introductory composition course around one central theme, rather than on many, can offer students an explicit model of how knowledge, skills, and dispositions interact when the critical thinker analyzes ideas and develops informed judgments. Writing instructors can model more clearly how their students will likely develop and employ critical thinking skills later in their academic careers, when they specialize in one area of study. First, concentrating on only one issue in the course would allow students to begin acquiring declarative knowledge crucial to critical thinking. Next, moving students beyond a novice understanding of numerous topics would force them to exercise their critical thinking skills on a growing body of knowledge to form clear, rational judgments. Additionally, instructors could develop recursive assignments which ask students to re-assess evaluations of material in light of the new information they are constantly gathering. As a result, readings would not lose their relevancy in the course, and students would ultimately be put in a better position to compare perspectives on issues, to analyze different ideas, and perhaps to synthesize a position of their own. Finally, an extended thematic writing course would allow for extremely productive types of group work, collaborative writing, and class discussion. (Twenty-eight references are attached.) (KEH)

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Critical Thinking and the Thematic Writing Course

Stephen Wilhoit

Composition instructors interested in fostering the development of their students' critical thinking skills have faced a problem of definition--there are a number of competing and, at times, seemingly irreconcilable conceptions of what "critical thinking" means (Beyer; Lipman). Consequently, instructors have approached the issue from a number of different perspectives. Some, adopting an epistemic orientation toward composition instruction, see a close connection between reasoning and writing (Lauer) and perceive instruction in critical thinking as essential to successful inquiry or problem solving (Flower and Hayes). Others, interested in connections between composition and cognitive development theory, see critical thinking as essential to making the transition from multiplistic to more reflective views of knowledge and authority (Hays; Kitchner and King; Perry). A third group, drawing largely on current work in writing across the curriculum, see a link between critical thinking and source-based writing. When writing from readings--the most frequently assigned type of essay across the curriculum (Behrens; Bridgeman and Carlson; Rose)--students must be able to think critically about the material, and to analyze and evaluate various sources of information as well as their own thoughts and feelings (Bazerman; Bizzell). Still others speak of critical thinking in terms of liberatory education or empowerment (Freire; Shor).

While there is still no concensus of opinion on what the term "critical thinking" means, one emerging group of researchers envisions it as a complex cognitive and affective activity involving three separate but equally important components: knowledge of the subject matter being studied, the ability to analyze and evaluate ideas

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according to both the procedures of informal logic and more discipline-specific criteria, and the disposition or willingness to apply these skills when forming and defending assertions. This conception of critical thinking--as involving certain types of knowledge, skills, and attitudes--has much to offer composition instructors interested in helping their students become more reflective, independent thinkers.

In his article "Critical Thinking: Fundamental to Education for a Free Society," Richard Paul makes a useful distinction between two conceptions of critical thinking. Thought of in the "weak sense," it concerns the ability to perform the various operations of informal logic and evaluation--for example, to find a source's thesis statement, to analyze organization, or to spot logical fallacies and unsupported assumptions. Paul sees these skills as "extrinsic to the character of the person" (3), skills that can be learned and applied across disciplines. Yet, in its "strong sense" critical thinking refers to skills and dispositions more intrinsic to a person's character, including the ability to think critically about one's own thinking, feelings, and beliefs (metacognitive reasoning) and a <u>willingness</u> to evaluate ideas and arguments. According to Paul, critical thinking helps to establish "a person's intellectual, emotional, and moral autonomy"; it is "emancipatory" (5).

John McPeck also contends that critical thinking consists of certain mental skills (primarily the ability to utilize informal logic) and certain attitudes, including a willingness to suspend judgment while gathering information and, when necessary, to modify or abandon beliefs already held. However, McPeck further argues that background knowledge (a familiarity with what has been said and written about the topic under study and an understanding of the evaluative procedures typically

employed in the discipline) is an essential component of critical thinking. For McPeck, there is no such thing as a "general" critical thinker. People can only think critically about subjects they know something about; as a result, an effective critical thinker in one area of study will not necessarily be an effective critical thinker in other areas ("Critical Thinking" 296). For example, someone able to critically assess theories of literature may not have the ability to critically assess theories of post-modern art or macroeconomics--the person may not possess the knowlege necessary for critical, reflective thought in all three fields. As McPeck explains in Critical Thinking and Education:

> Even a Renaissance man, competent in all fields, would possess many different sets of skills, not one set that he applied to all fields. . . . A person might have the disposition to think criticallly in all areas, in the sense that he tries to do this, but he is not in fact a critical thinker unless he has an understanding of the area or field in which he is being critical. (156)

Thus, for McPeck, a critical thinker must have the requisite skills, disposition, and knowledge to engage in the activity successfully (Critical Thinking 17).

McPeck and Paul both believe that critical thinking is best taught within dispicline-specific courses. That is, in literature courses one learns how to think critically about literature; in economics courses, one learns to think critically about economics. The two differ, though, on whether discipline-specific courses are the only appropriate setting for instruction in critical thinking. McPeck adopts what Ennis has termed an "immersion" approach to critical thinking instruction, believing it can only be taught in subject-specific courses (5).

According to Ennis, immersion involves "a thought-provoking kind of subject matter instruction in which students do get deeply immersed in the subject, but in which general critical thinking principles are not made explicit" (5). In place of "general" critical thinking skills, students learn to analyze and evaluate ideas according to criteria unique to the specific subject area under study. As McPeck explains, these critical thinking skills "are an inherent part of the warp and woof of the various disciplines and must, therefore, be taught as a part of them" ("Critical Thinking" 307).

However, Paul advocates more of an "infusion" approach to critical thinking instruction, which Ennis explains as "deep, thoughtful, well understood subject-matter instruction in which students are encouraged to think critically in the subject, and in which general principles of critical thinking dispositions and abilities are made explicit" (5). Paul suggests that students can learn general critical thinking skills that cut across disciplines. Offering instruction and practice in these general critical thinking abilities may help our students attain "at least primitive emancipatory thinking skills" (7). Kurfiss, too, holds that we can identify general critical thinking skills and dispositions employed across the curriculum and that by offering students the opportunity to develop these abilities, we can help make them more independent, reflective thinkers.

At many schools, the introductory composition course has become the setting where students first receive instruction in critical thinking, especially if that class stresses either academic, source-based writing or argumentation. Numerous composition texts on the market address the analytical skills component of critical thinking, usually under chapter headings such as "Logical Fallacies" (Seyler), "Critical Reading"

(Bell), or "Analytical Reading and Writing" (Veit and Clifford). These chapters typically instruct students to look for inconsistencies in a source, detect authorial bias, judge the adequacy of conclusions, spot logical fallacies, and so forth. Clearly, though, teaching critical thinking involves more than just helping students master these skills. Instead, we need to offer in our composition classes a model for how topic knowledge, analytical reasoning skills, and a "questioning" attitude are all involved in critical, reflective thought.

Perhaps the best model we currently have is the thematic writing course. Unfortunately, most writing textbooks do not adopt such an approach. Many readers, for example, typically present students with a series of essays arranged in chapters that cover a number of different issues (see, for example, Anderson and Forrester; Behrens and Rosen; Chittenden and Kiniry). Whether the topic is "Nuclear War," "Bilingual Education," or "Gender," students are typically expected to examine the essays, perhaps gather additional material on the topic, form some kind of judgment, write their papers, then move on to the next chapter and issue. For a number of reasons we would be able to teach critical thinking more effectively if we would ask students to explore only one theme or issue over a much longer period of time.

For example, Kurfiss maintains that effective critical thinking requires at least two different types of knowledge: declarative (knowledge about a subject) and procedural (knowledge of "how information is obtained, analyzed, and communicated in a discipline") (40). If we adopt a thematic approach to composition instruction we would be able to present our students with an effective model for gaining access to both types of knowledge. First, concentrating on one issue in a course would allow our students to begin acquiring the type

of declarative knowledge McPeck sees as crucial to critical thinking. As McPeck writes: "Critical thinking always manifests itself in connection with some identifiable activity or subject area and never in isolation" (Critical Thinking 5). Moving our students beyond a novice understanding of the topics under study in their composition classes would force them to exercise their critical thinking skills on a growing body of knowledge if they hope to form clear, rational judgments. Instructors could also develop recursive assignments which ask students to reassess evaluations of material in light of the new information they are constantly gathering. Thus, readings do not lose their relevancy in a course. Each source read, each position assumed, remains open to reevaluation. As a result of their wider knowledge of the topic under study, students would also be put in a better position to compare perspectives on issues, to analyze different ideas, and perhaps to synthesize a position of their own.

In addition, each subject area has its own body of accepted views, its own specialized vocabulary, its own criteria for making judgments, and its own assumptions about what constitutes proof--in short, its own body of procedural knowledge. Appreciating the existence and impact of such defining assumptions and criteria is an important aspect of critical thinking achieved only by reading widely in a subject, analyzing and comparing material drawn from many different disciplines. In a thematic composition course, individual students adopting a multi-discipline form of investigation would at least be introduced to the importance of procedural knowledge. For example, if they investigate a theme from economic, religious, and historical perspectives, they will be introduced to the proceedural knowledge common to these fields of study, and if they attempt to then synthesize this information into a

position of their own, they will need specifically to address how that proceedural knowledge influenced the various interpretations of information they discovered. Or perhaps a group of students investigating the same general theme from different critical or discipline perspectives could share information, perhaps forming "focus groups" in order to discuss the differences of interpretation, methodology, and argumentation they find. As Kurfiss notes, "Integrating multiple forms of knowledge in instruction offers a coherent way to ensure that students will take from their education a rich and accessible store of knowledge and skills" (49). A thematic writing course allows for extremely productive types of group work, collaborative writing, and class discussion.

However, such collaboration and debate largely depend on the students' ability to analyze and construct arguments, another important aspect of critical thinking a thematic writing course might foster. There are several types of analytical reasoning skills students need to practice in order to become efficient critical thinkers. First, there are the abilities Ennis terms "general" critical thinking skills (5), what many composition texts term "informal logic" or "argument analysis." Next, there is metacognitive reasoning--learning to think about one's own thinking. Finally, there is "problem finding," an important component of critical thinking discussed by those interested in formal operational reasoning (Arlin) but not widely discussed by composition theorists. Problem finding involves, in part, determining where controversy exists, examining why it exists, and asking appropriate questions about it.

In a thematic writing course where students draw information from many different fields, continuously discuss their growing understanding

of the topic with others, and attempt to defend particular positions or interpretations, all three types of reasoning skills come into play. Through carefully constructed essay assignments, journal projects, and class discussions, we can encourage students to summarize, analyze, and critique arguments (informal logic skills), foreground the reasoning that led them to their current position or allows them to maintain it (metacognitive skills), and continually reappraise that position and redefine the points of contention (problem finding). Kurfiss notes that as teachers we can help students obtain these skills through modeling, coaching, practice, and response (49).

Finally, a thematic approach to writing instruction may also help teachers foster the development of the attitudes and dispositions Paul, McPeck, and Kurfiss see as essential to critical thinking. These theorists agree that critical thinkers must be disposed to analyze and evaluate opinions and assertions, their own included. They must be willing to suspend judgment until they form a reasoned conclusion and must acknowledge that such conclusions are tentative at best since further reasoning, experience, or research may necessitate change. Kurfiss holds that we can increase our students' motivation to think critically through the way we present material and allow students to interact (48).

As a result of structuring a writing course around some central theme or themes, the students' willingness to exercise their critical thinking skills is likely to increase as they learn more about the topic under study and become increasingly able to evaluate sources and points of view against one another. Increasing their knowledge of the subject and offering them opportunities to exercise their evaluative skills successfully will reinforce in the students a positive attitude toward

critical thinking, helping them recognize the importance and value of such skills. Also, only when investigating an issue in depth will students begin to see that experts and authorities disagree, criticize one another's work, and even revise positions they themselves once held firmly. Students will see that critical thinking is needed and expected in academics, that a willingness to suspend judgment, evaluate information, and even modify beliefs is fundamental to higher order reasoning.

Many researchers (e.g., Brookfield; Kurfiss) agree that another way to increase students' willingness to engage in critical thinking is to allow them to define for themselves the problems they will investigate and to give them the opportunity to discuss their ideas with others. When the problem or question is a real one for them, something that interests them, something they want to learn or argue about, students will invest more time, attention, and energy into the project. Within the framework of a thematic composition course, students could easily be given the freedom to choose the questions they investigate and the problems they set for themselves. Frequent class discussion and debate, group work, and collaborative learning opportunities would also increase the likelihood tht students will utilize the knowledge and critical thinking skills they are acquiring and refining.

There are, of course, several ways to structure a thematic writing course. For example, composition instructors could either assign their students a theme or topic to investigate over the course of a term or allow the students to choose themes for themselves. Students could investigate one theme by examining a number of related issues, or they could investigate the same theme from a number of different perspectives. For example, a class may choose to examine nuclear war.

Instructors could then ask the students to investigate a number of related issues--the policy of mutual assurred destruction, the nuclear freeze movement, and Star Wars--or they could ask the students to consider the topic of nuclear war from a number of different perspectives--economic, moral, and sociological. Given the particular theme, cross disciplinary team teaching is also possible. For instance, a thematic writing course focusing on the Vietnam War could be team taught by instructors from English and history. No matter how such a thematic writing course is structured, though, with each source students read and analyze, with each interview they conduct, with each discussion they hold, they will be gaining knowledge they can apply to their analysis of future information--knowledge of the topic itself and knowledge of how opinions and arguments in various disciplines are generally formed and defended. Also, as they learn more about the topic, the students will be able to critically assess material more successfully, increasing their willingness to exercise their newly developed skills.

One clear problem with a thematic approach is obviously student interest--what if the student who is placed in a course is not interested in the chosen theme? This problem can be mitigated by leaving the choice of theme open to individual students or by choosing flexible themes approachable from many different perspectives, allowing for questions that originate from various interests, themes such as "Work," "Language," or "Education." Then there is the question of assignments: what types of assignments are most appropriate for a thematic writing course whose aim is to foster students' critical thinking abilities? In general, the assignemnts should provide "practice in academically important skills like reading comprehension,

summarization, analysis, comparison and contrast, and evaluation of ideas" (Kurfiss 23-24). As Marilyn Sternglass states, "guided practice in combined processes of reading, writing, and reasoning foster greater improvement in each process than does consideration of each as an isolated, separate skill" (ix). Instruction and practice in critical reading plus summarizing, analyzing, responing to, and synthesizing information would all seem to be appropriate for a thematic writing course since they offer students the opportunity to understand then compare perspectives on a topic before then forming and defending a position of their own (Bazerman; Behrens and Rosen; Sternglass).

Finally, there are questions concerning the amount of progress that can actually be made in one course over one semester or one quarter. Can combining instruction in critical thinking and composition actually make a difference in student performance or attitudes across the disciplines and outside of school? Instructors in the type of course I have been describing here would need constatnly to remind students that they are presenting a <u>model</u> of how the students might begin to think critically about the issues they confront in everyday life and in their other classes. If we can move students to accept the proposition that critical thinking is important and can be liberatory, then we have made important progress.

If critical thinking actually involves some combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, then composition instructors interested in helping their students become more effective critical thinkers face a difficult task. In our classrooms are students with different majors, different interests, and different life experiences. To be a critical thinker in any field entails knowing that subject area well and demonstrating the willingness and ability to evaluate claims

and propositions on the basis of that knowledge. Focusing an introductory composition course around a central theme that will deeply involve our students can allow us to model more clearly how the students will likely develop and employ critical thinking skills later in their academic careers, when they begin to specialize in one area of study, or in their every day lives, when they vote, contemplate career choices, or make purchases. Offering an explicit model of how knowledge, skills, and dispositions interact when analyzing ideas and developing reasoned, informed judgments may be some of the best instruction we can offer our students.

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